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AUTHOR Quinn, James E.
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ABSTRACT

Tom Stoppard's play, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," focuses on the antics and tragedy of two minor characters in Shakespeare's "Hamlet." Although satirical of their philosophical pretensions, the play conveys the uncertainty and confusion of its two principal characters and thus reflects modern man's dilemma. The provocative questions raised by the play lend themselves to lively classroom discussion and could also provide insights into the study of "Hamlet." (Numerous topics for composition or discussion are included, as well as a brief bibliography of reviews on the play.) (MF)

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ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE ALIVE IN THE CLASSROOM

by James E. Quinn

Critics call it *"Hamlet* Inside Out"; others claim it's a modern "parable of little Everyman"; but most agree that Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is an exciting witty, and provocative play. Like the successful *Westside Story,* the plot is borrowed from Shakespeare, specifically, a view of the double-crossed friends of Hamlet, who are passing their time in route to Elsinore to check up on Hamlet's "affliction," which includes a modern *Murder of Gonzago* and their eventual trip on the ship that is returning Hamlet to England. Along the way, British playwright Stoppard takes us on a satiric run through the child-like antics of the secondary messengers — from coin flipping to "philosophical disputations." With all the comic confusions, play on words, exits and entrances, one is caught up in a fast but funny pace, from start to finish. On the surface the play is a picture of minor class life, with all its uncertainty and confusion. But Stoppard's pair, whose lives are "fixed and formalized," grow to tragic capacity as they later ponder their own mission, fate, and uncertain future. Throughout they are unaware of the fate to which they have been subjected. As the thirty-one-year-old playwright suggests, they are "bewildered by the parts they must play." Indeed, their uncertainty and confusion becomes ours.

TE 001 101

After a run of many months in London (the first production in April, 1967), 421 performances on Broadway, a Grove Press paperback edition, and numerous reviews, I felt the work deserved consideration in the classroom. Besides I was looking for a short contemporary play, one that appeals widely, and something comic and fresh. Its impact, to put it mildly, was ecstatic. Our discussions were lively and relevant. Some saw the play as tragedy, some comedy, some neither, but none was indifferent. As a result several attended a nearby performance.

Before discussing the play, I found it prudent to review such concepts as: tragedy, comedy, satire, irony, characterization, staging, Elizabethan history, and, of course, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (I should think R & G would make an interesting companion study). From the teacher's view, it might be well to know that Stoppard is not an Englishman but born in Prague of Jewish parents (his original name was Straussler) and spent time in Czechoslovakia, Singapore, India, and England. His physician father was killed when the Japanese invaded Malaya in W W II. His mother later remarried a British Army man named Stoppard, and Tom was brought up in Yorkshire, attended local schools, and in 1960 began to write plays for television. While in London, he published a novel, *Lord Malmquist and Mr. Moon,* and with the assistance of a Ford Foundation grant, and several rewrites, the Oxford Theater Group presented R & G at the Edinburgh Festival in 1966.

Before attempting the play, I read several reviews, a few of which are listed in a brief bibliography here. In addition, the following topics may be used for either discussion or composition, depending on time and purpose:

GENERAL

1. *R & G* as a definition of: Death, Boredom, or Conformity
   Modern Tragedy
   20th Century Satire
   Modern Comedy
2. *R & G* as a study in: Dialogue
   Point of View
   Futility
   Class Struggle
   Ambivalence
   Escape From Reality
   The Path of Least Resistance

Logic
Failure to Act
Minor Characters (Player, Tragedians)

3. *R & G*: Victims of Circumstances
A View of Modern Denmark
A Play on Words
Life's Waiting Game
A Play With No End
A View of Elizabethan Life
A Satire on Religion
Another Little Man Tragedy
The Indecipherable Dialogue
A Social Case Study
The Use of Stage Directions
A Need For Answers
The Role of the Audience
A Satire on Directions
The Thin Line of Tragedy & Comedy
A Play for All Ages

COMPARISON

1. *R & G*: Modern Hamlet or Anti-Hamlet
And the Two Tramps in Becket's *Waiting for Godot*
And *Six Characters in Search for an Author*
An Abbott and Costello Comedy

2. *Hamlet's* And *R & G's* Play Within A Play
R & G: And the Adult's World of Decisions (Indecisions)
Coins and the Law of Probability
Two Half Men and Milton's Poems *Allegro & Il Penseroso*
And the Song "The Games People Play"
And the Two Thugs in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*
The Stage Version vs. the Reading Version.

CHARACTERS

1. R & G's Alfred as Player Queen Claudius: A Study in Modern Guilt and the Strolling Players.
2. Strolling Players as: Actors & Pragmatists, Prophets & Profiteers, Foils of R & G

MISCELLANEOUS QUOTES

"Life is a terrible gamble."
"What good's a brick to a drowning man?"
"Life in a box is better than no life at all"
"Wheels have been set in motion and they have their own pace, to which we are . . . condemned."
"Our names shouted in a certain dawn . . . a message . . . a summons . . . there must have been a moment, at the beginning, when we could have said — no. But somehow we missed it."

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